

CHAPTER 5. MRT IMPLEMENTATION

To be effective, the implementation process for the Iowa portion of the MRT should address key difficulties in implementation, as well as contacts and agencies needed for implementation. It must address not only areas where trails can easily be implemented but also areas where potential trail development difficulties may lie. In addition to physical trail development problems, the implementation process will address potential partnerships for trail development, governance issues with the MRT, legislation requirements, and potential funding sources for trail segments.

Known Difficulties along the Recommended Route

The Iowa MRT will primarily designate bicycle lanes as the MRT and then fill gaps of unsuitable road corridors with off-road bicycle trails or other alternatives. However, as discussed previously, off-road trails present higher costs than bicycle lanes, and potential routings of off-road trails depend upon current land holdings and land acquisitions. The most difficult problem in implementing the Iowa MRT will be those places where no suitable on-road options have been found and a new off-road facility needs to be designed and constructed.

Ownership and Lead Organizations

The MRT in Iowa will be made up of a variety of on-road facilities and dedicated, off-road trails owned by the state, counties, cities, and other organizations. It is imperative that a lead organization be clearly identified for each segment of the Iowa MRT as quickly as possible so that the plan can move forward.

Coordination of Development

The Iowa DOT should take the lead in coordinating the development of the MRT in Iowa based on this plan. Development should be done in cooperation with lead organizations identified for each trail segment plus groups such as MRT, Inc., the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, the Mississippi River Parkway Commission, and the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation.

Priorities for Development

It is generally the case that urban portions of the MRT will tend to have the most use by cyclists and others. They will also generate the most economic impact per mile. Therefore, encouraging their development should be a top priority. Fortunately, many urban MRT routes in Iowa are already in place, are programmed, are planned, or could be developed using existing city street networks.

Following urban routes, there are a number of rural routes on existing state highways and county roads that are nearly suitable for signing as MRT routes today. In some cases all they need is a paved shoulder to be signed. These routes are identified in the plan as the best candidates for promotion as “demonstration projects” since they could be planned and quickly put in place. Last priority should be given to rural routes where extensive engineering studies and extensive improvements will likely be needed to develop them to meet design guidelines.

Paying for Development Costs

The Iowa MRT will require in excess of \$30 million to develop. This funding will necessarily come from a variety of sources, including existing state highway and trail funds, federal highway enhancement funds, Vision Iowa Program funds, local government funds, and private funds. Realistically, full development of the MRT will take 5 to 10 years and will require new funding. The most likely source of new funding for the MRT in Iowa is transportation “demonstration” funds from the next federal surface transportation act. Reauthorization of the act is in progress at this time. The Iowa DOT (with the assistance of other interested groups) should take the lead in seeking new demonstration funds specifically for the development of the MRT.

Long-Term Development Opportunities (Abandoned Railroad Corridors and Levees)

This plan was unable to address certain long-term possibilities for improving the quality of the Iowa MRT through the incorporation of future abandoned railroad rights-of-way and trails built on or along levees. These are ideal locations for the MRT in that there is no motor vehicle traffic, the grades would be gentle, and the distance to the Mississippi River would be minimized. All railroads near the recommended MRT alignment are active at present. No abandonment plans have been filed. Should any be abandoned in the future, consideration should be given to acquiring their right-of-way for the development of more off-road trail facilities. Placing off-road trails on or along levees was explored as a portion of the planning process. The Army Corps of Engineers was generally supportive of levee trails and has built them in some southern states. However, most levees in Iowa are owned and maintained by agricultural levee districts. These districts were not certain that they want to have trails built and operated on their levees due to unresolved issues such as liability, maintenance, and restriction of motorized vehicle users. Additional negotiations and planning beyond the scope of the Iowa MRT plan would be required in order for any levee trails to be built.

Maintenance and Operational Issues

Paying for Maintenance Costs

The MRT will have to be maintained to a high standard if it is to be well used and successful. The identified owners/lead agencies should be responsible for ongoing operations and maintenance. Each time the Iowa DOT arranges for state and/or federal funding for a portion of the MRT in Iowa, the Iowa DOT and the trail owner should agree to specific maintenance standards and provisions.

Marketing

A marketing plan for the MRT should be developed as soon as a practical number of segments are in place and signed. The development of the marketing plan should involve the Iowa DOT, Iowa Department of Economic Development Tourism Office, MRT, Inc., and other appropriate groups, including local groups with a stake in promoting the use of the MRT. A set of maps and/or cue sheets should be cooperatively developed for the Iowa portion of the MRT.

Identity and Signage

All portions of the MRT in Iowa should be clearly identified by MRT logo signage and other appropriate directional signage as soon as the segment meets the design guidelines set forth in this plan. All Iowa MRT promotional literature and electronic information should have a consistent visual theme.

Policy toward Motorized Vehicles on Off-Road Portions of the Iowa MRT

Motorized vehicles (e.g., snowmobiles, motorcycles, and four-wheelers) should be discouraged from using the off-road (dedicated trail) portions of the Iowa MRT during the normal cycling season. Mixing bicycles and such vehicles on off-road trails is likely to lead to safety problems and less satisfied cycling and pedestrian users.

Legal motor vehicles cannot be excluded from using the on-road portions of the Iowa MRT (including the paved shoulders developed for safer cycling). However, motor vehicle users should be strongly reminded that they must “share the road.”

Liability

Owners of an MRT segment will be legally responsible for their portion of the Iowa MRT. The owners of Iowa MRT segments will mainly be the Iowa DOT and individual counties.

Variety of Riding Conditions

Some portions of the Iowa MRT identified in this plan will be safe to bike but will also be challenging to bike due to steep grades. These segments are mainly north of Dubuque and south of the Minnesota state border. These challenging segments need to be clearly identified to potential users on signage, cycling maps, cue sheets, and promotional materials so that only advanced riders attempt to use them.